



**TESTIMONY OF
THE CONNECTICUT JUVENILE JUSTICE ALLIANCE

FOR THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
HEARING ON THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSED
JUDICIAL BRANCH BUDGET**

FEBRUARY 23, 2008

This testimony is submitted by Abby Anderson, Executive Director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance (Alliance). The Alliance is a statewide, non-profit organization that works to reduce the number of children and youth entering the juvenile and criminal justice system, and advocates a safe, effective and fair system for those involved.

The Alliance is very disappointed that Governor Rell proposes a delay in Raise the Age, which would end Connecticut's practice of putting non-violent minors in adult prisons. This testimony outlines why we strongly believe this would be a mistake – for public safety, for the economy, for re-balancing budgets, and for our youth.

Secondly, the Alliance is sorry to see the lack of funds allocated to fulfill the state's mandated responsibility to provide the services of a Family Support Center to every child in the state. The new Families With Service Needs (FWSN) system is successfully working to divert young people from the juvenile justice system and should be supported. Referrals to the FWSN system are down 38%, creating vacancies in programs and services throughout the juvenile system, vacancies that can now be utilized by the 16 and 17 year-olds arriving with Raise the Age on January 1.

Referrals into the juvenile justice system as a whole are also down by significant percentages (11% as of November 2008). Detention facilities are experiencing very low census numbers with more than 100 open beds on a regular basis. Returning 16 and 17 year olds to these programs would actually improve the cost effectiveness of them, and would not require additional staff or facilities.

Together, the **Raise the Age and FWSN reforms offer significant long-term, systemic financial savings**, as described below.

First, the Alliance strongly opposes the Governor's proposal to cut programs and services in the Judicial Branch and Court Support Services Division budget that are needed to ensure the effective and efficient on-time implementation of Raise the Age – January 1, 2010. These programs and services include courthouse closings and position eliminations (including probation officers, judges and support staff), rescissions, elimination or deferral of some leases, and cuts to planned services for 16 and 17 year olds returning to the juvenile justice system.

Secondly, the Alliance requests that the Appropriations Committee fully fund the Family With Service Needs policies and practices, implementation of which began in 2007. Specifically, the system still needs (A) concerted efforts to reduce truancy, especially in school districts with the highest truancy rates, (B) six additional Family Support Centers so that every Connecticut community is served (FWSN adjudications are down 94% overall, with the adjudications that are occurring coming from communities without a Family Support Center), and (C) requirements for strong, meaningful collaboration between state agencies with responsibilities for children.

Why Delaying Raise the Age Would Be a Costly Mistake

During the 2007 legislative session, with the passage of PA 07-4, Connecticut's legislature raised the age of adult jurisdiction from 16 to 18, effective January 1, 2010. Aside from serious and violent offenders, minors will be under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system. This is an important and historic change as Connecticut has been one of only three states to try all 16 and 17 year olds as adults -- no matter how minor their crime.

Delaying Raise the Age would balance no budgets. In fact, it would encourage many short-sighted spending practices, and it would be harmful to public safety and to the state's most vulnerable children:

Youth would suffer. Kids sent to adult prisons are more likely to reoffend and to escalate into serious crime than peers in the juvenile system. The governor herself raised the issue of moving these teens to juvenile jurisdiction after a 17-year-old committed suicide in an adult Connecticut prison. Last year, another boy killed himself in the same prison. Youth in adult prisons are also at greater risk of serious assault by adult inmates.

Delay would encourage inefficiency and waste. Connecticut wisely made a shift toward community-based early intervention in recent years. The success of these programs has created many vacancies in DCF and Court Support Services Division programs -- the very programs that would receive many of the 16- and 17-year-olds affected by the law. These programs could serve more children at little cost and ease overcrowding in adult prisons at considerable savings.

The state has spent millions in preparation for Raise the Age, money that would be wasted if we don't proceed. The legislatively mandated Juvenile Jurisdiction Planning and Oversight Coordinating Council (JJPOCC) has been meeting regularly to ensure timely and appropriate implementation of policy and practice shifts so that a smooth transition will occur in January of 2010.

Raise the Age is not an unfunded mandate. Lobbyists armed with misinformation have painted Raise the Age as burdensome to municipalities. In fact, no police department will have to change its physical space in response to the law, which includes new provisions that spare local departments the job of holding teens. Eighty one percent of Connecticut municipalities only arrest one child in this age group per week.

Raise the Age contributes to economic growth. An adult record cuts off opportunities for education, jobs, military service and myriad other avenues to productive citizenship. Every year thousands of Connecticut teens have their economic potential stunted by an adult arrest for a minor charge. Furthermore, Raise the Age will create hundreds of jobs – for probation officers, counselors and social workers.

Raising the Age is not a luxury. Raise the Age is already law, a commitment made by our governor and legislators. The state would not be deferring a program that would be “nice to have;” delaying would be a broken promise.

Why Supporting FWSN is Important

Status offenses are not crimes but problem behaviors like truancy, running away, out-of-control behavior and “immoral conduct.” Connecticut legislation calls status offenders “Families with Service Needs (FWSN)” and sees 3,600 to 4,000 of these cases each year. Historically, more than half of FWSN youth ended up in the juvenile justice system as delinquents. After recent reforms, these numbers are decreasing. In short, the new system is working, and is creating vacancies in programs and services that 16 and 17 year-olds can utilize after the implementation of Raise the Age on January 1 without additional cost.

FWSN children need support. Reforms implemented in 2007 moved the system toward family engagement and community-based services. Connecticut is working to identify high need youth and families earlier, and provide a wider array of programs and services to address their needs and improve their behaviors before they lead to delinquency referrals.

Two ways that would make that early identification and intervention more effective:

1. Implement efforts to reduce truancy, the cause of 50% of FWSN referrals. Schools need the tools to quickly determine the cause of the child's absenteeism and work with the family to ensure regular attendance. Although recommended last year, there has been no state funding to address truancy.
2. Ensure equal access to services for all Connecticut families. The law calls for families to be given information about programs already available (e.g., YSBs, Boys & Girls Clubs, faith-based initiatives, etc.). Families with high, immediate needs are entitled to assistance at a Family Support Center, which help the family access services like family mediation, educational advocacy, mentoring, crisis intervention, and intensive, in-home therapies. The Family Support Center can also refer to respite beds in the state.

Though state law requires that every family in Connecticut has access to a Family Support Center, there are currently only 4 across the state-leaving out youth and families in 130 of Connecticut's 169 communities.

CSSD needs only \$1.1 million to open the 6 additional needed Family Support Centers next year, and then \$2.2 million to annualize operations of all 10 Family Support Centers.

The Country is Applauding and Watching

Connecticut is winning national praise for its recent juvenile justice reform. The state is being showcased by national organizations and legislative groups, including:

- **National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL):** Representative Toni Walker spoke about Connecticut at the NCSL *Spring Forum* in Washington, DC and is featured in NCSL's *State Legislatures* magazine;
- **Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA):** At CPA's *Summit on the States* in December in Washington, DC, representatives of the Connecticut General Assembly and CTJJA presented on Connecticut's reform;
- **National Black Caucus of State Legislatures (NBCSL):** Connecticut representatives presented at their national conference in Little Rock in December;
- **National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ):** The Hon. Barbara M. Quinn spoke at NCJFCJ's national conference in St. Louis in March, and an article authored by the Hon. William Lavery was featured in NCJFCJ's publication *Juvenile and Family Justice Today*;
- **American Correctional Association (ACA):** ACA featured a piece by Senator Ed Meyer in *Corrections Today*. Department of Juvenile Services Director Leo Arnone was a featured speaker at ACA's annual meeting in New Orleans;
- **Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ):** Connecticut was featured prominently in a roundtable discussion at CJJ's spring conference where the audience included state officials and members of state advisory groups from all over the country;
- **2008 Kids Count Juvenile Justice Essay:** Each year, Kids Count focuses an essay on one topic and in 2008 they focused on juvenile justice. The essay highlights Connecticut's legislative success in raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction and marks it as a critical reform model that other states and jurisdictions should follow.

In conclusion, it is critical that Connecticut stay on track with its two-pronged approach to reform: (1) on-time implementation of Raise the Age on January 1, 2010 and (B) full implementation of the FWSN system. The Alliance understands the road will be bumpy without ideal levels of funding; but that is not a reason to delay. The effectiveness of the FWSN reforms, along with programs working on the detention side of juvenile court have created vacancies in the current system, offering an opportunity for new efficiencies of scale with Raise the Age. The reforms are working; juvenile referrals are steadily

declining. Now is not the time to stop. Raising the Age is good for the state's economy, for our communities, for public safety, and for our youth and their future.

Thank you for your time and attention to this most important matter; please do not hesitate to let me know if I can provide additional information.

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